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MEMBRANE TENSION CONTROL

Claim of Benefit of Provisional Application

5 Pursuant to 35 U.S.C. §119, the benefit of priority from provisional application 60/161,113, with a filing date of October 22, 1999, is claimed for this non-provisional application.

Cross Reference to Related Cases

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This application is related to co-pending, commonly owned patent application Serial No. _____, filed October 23, 2000, entitled "Electrostrictive Graft Elastomers."

15 Origin of the Invention

The invention described herein was made by an employee of the United States Government and a National Research Council Research Associate and may be used by or for the Government for governmental purposes without the
20 payment of any royalties thereon or therefor.

Background of the InventionField of the Invention

25 The present invention is generally related to tension control of membranes using an electroactive actuator having at least predominantly single axis displacement.

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Description of the Related Art

Membrane inflatable and deployable space structures are widely employed by the government and commercially as reflectors, antennas, solar arrays, satellites, solar sails, etc. Although these membrane inflatable and deployable structures are widely used, many challenges exist which limit their performance for high precision applications. Factors affecting precision include surface smoothness, deviation from desired surface profile, surface deformations due to thermal fluctuations, and accurate membrane positioning.

Actuation devices are used for many applications, including the shaping, tuning, positioning, controlling and deforming of membrane structures. To operate most effectively in the aforementioned applications, actuation devices require sufficient force and strain, and often need to produce complex motions.

Conventional piezoelectric ceramic, polymer, and composite actuators (including piezoelectric, electrostrictive, and electrostatic) lack the combination of sufficient strain and force to most effectively perform the aforementioned functions. Previous concepts for shaping and tuning membrane structures have primarily involved the use of piezoelectric ceramic materials. These ceramic piezoelectrics have the major problems of large mass, high density, low strain and high brittleness. Generally, piezoceramics also need additional mechanical devices to achieve a shaping, tuning, positioning, controlling or deforming function. In contrast to electroceramics, electroactive polymers are emerging as new actuation materials due to their enhanced strain capabilities.

Tension control of membranes, using electrostrictive polymer actuators exhibiting at least predominantly single axis displacement and having sufficient force and strain, to smooth local surface wrinkles which may result from thermal distortions and other sources is desirable and currently lacking in the related art.

Summary of the Invention

Accordingly, an object of the present invention is to provide an electroactive tension control device.

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Another object is to provide an electroactive tension control device wherein the electroactive components have small mass, low density, high strain and low brittleness.

Another object is to provide an electroactively controlled inflatable
5 membrane.

Another object is to provide an electroactive tension control device using electrostrictive polymer actuators.

Another object is to provide an electrostrictive polymer actuator exhibiting displacement along a longitudinal axis when electrically activated.

10 Additional objects and advantages of the present invention are apparent from the drawings and specification that follow.

In accordance with the present invention, an electrostrictive polymer actuator comprises an electrostrictive polymer with a tailorabile Poisson's ratio. The electrostrictive polymer is electrodeed on its upper and lower surfaces and 15 bonded to an upper material layer. The assembly is rolled tightly and capped at its ends. In a membrane structure having a membrane, a supporting frame and a plurality of threads connecting the membrane to the frame, an actuator can be integrated into one or more of the plurality of threads. The electrostrictive polymer actuator displaces along its longitudinal axis, thereby affecting movement of the membrane surface.
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Brief Description of the Drawings

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25 A more complete appreciation of the invention and the many of the attendant advantages thereof will be readily attained as the same becomes better understood by reference to the following detailed description when considered in connection with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIG. 1 illustrates a prior art membrane structure.

FIG. 2 illustrates the prior art membrane structure with integrated tension
30 control actuators.

FIGS. 3A and 3B illustrate the actuator layers.

FIGS. 4A and 4B illustrate the actuator in its rolled state.

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FIG. 4C is a cross-sectional view of FIG. 4B illustrating greater detail of the cap attachment.

Detailed Description of the Invention

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Referring now to the drawings, and more particularly to FIG. 1, a prior art multifunctional membrane structure is shown and referenced generally by the numeral 100. Membrane 110 is connected to supporting frame 120 by threads 130. The threads 130 are generally a metallic material. FIG. 1 is a general representation of a membrane structure; however, the exact shape of the membrane and supporting structure may vary from that shown. FIG. 2 illustrates electrostrictive polymer actuators 140 integrated into threads 130. The actuators 140 expand or contract along the axis of the threads, thereby increasing or decreasing tension in the threads to make local adjustments to maintain the membrane surface in working condition. An actuator 140 can be integrated into one or more threads 130 as desired.

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Referring now to FIGs. 3A and 3B, actuator 140 comprises layer 310 of an electrostrictive polymer material having a tailor able Poisson's ratio. The strain in layer 310 increases in one direction as Poisson's ratio tends to zero. Any deviation of Poisson's ratio away from zero will produce off-axis displacement. Such off-axis displacement is preferably minimized. A Poisson's ratio of zero provides the especially preferred single axis displacement. A preferred material is the electrostrictive graft elastomer described and claimed in "Electrostrictive Graft Elastomers", Serial No. _____, filed October 23, 2000, hereby incorporated by reference. The Poisson's ration is tailored via crystal orientation. Layer 310 is electroded 320 on both its upper and lower surfaces. The electrodes 320 can be single surface electrodes or interdigitated electrodes. An interdigitated electrode configuration allows additional options to vary drive voltage to the electrodes depending on the electrode spacing of a particular design. Suitable materials for the electrodes are conductive polymers, such as polypyrrole or ployaniline, or soft metals, such as gold. The surface of layer 310 that is electroded is maximized. Layer 330 is

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~~bonded to the upper electroded layer 310. A suitable bonding material is a chemical adhesive, such as epoxy. It is preferred for layer 330 to be of the same material as layer 310 so that layer 310 can function as either an active or inactive layer depending on whether it is electrically activated. If a different material is used for layer 330, it must be an insulator. The surface area and thickness of the various layers will vary depending upon specific response requirements.~~

5 material is used for layer 330, it must be an insulator. The surface area and thickness of the various layers will vary depending upon specific response requirements.

The bonded layers, denoted generally by numeral 340 are tightly rolled, as illustrated in the exploded view of FIG. 4A, so that there is entire surface contact throughout the roll 410. The overall size of the rolled configuration will depend upon the specific response requirements. The caps 420 are affixed onto both ends of the roll 410, as shown in FIG. 4B. The caps 420 maintain the roll 410 in its rolled configuration and also connect the roll 410 to the threads 430. The caps 420 are insulated metal or plastic, with plastic being preferred.

10 Referring to FIG. 4C, cap 420 is affixed to the roll 410 by chemical or mechanical bonding means. The preferred bonding means is a chemical adhesive that is cast and cured at room temperature and is compatible with the materials being bonded, such as epoxy. The cap 420 overlaps the roll 410 to the extent necessary to achieve sufficient bonding. The threads 430 are

15 attached to the cap 420 using chemical or mechanical means. Illustrated in FIG. 4C is a mechanical means 440 affixing the thread 430 to the cap 420. The cap 420 is bonded 450 to the roll 410. Again referring to FIG. 1, the longitudinal axis of each actuator 140 is substantially aligned with the direction of the thread 130 within which it is integrated. In operation, the actuators 140 respond to the

20 output of sensors located on membrane 110 via an integrated feedback control system.

Obviously, numerous additional modifications and variations of the present invention are possible in light of the above teachings. It is therefore to be understood that within the scope of the appended claims, the invention may 30 be practiced otherwise than is specifically described herein.

What is claimed is: